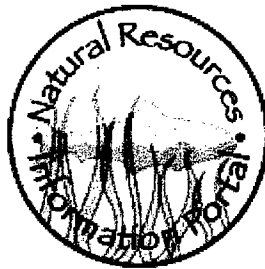Salmon and Watershed Information Team

---

THE WA NATURAL RESOURCES INFORMATION PORTAL

Phase I:

Project Archival Memorandum & Final Policy Analysis

Written by Nadine L. Romero
Natural Resources Portal Project Coordinator
June 18, 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Phase I of the Natural Resources Information Portal was officially completed on June 1, 2003. At this time the web portal application was placed 'on-line' for public use and inquiry on the host servers housed at the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC). The site URL address is: www.swim.wa.gov and is officially referenced on the Access Washington site under the *Featured Sites* listing, the *Natural Resources Index* and the *Subject Index*.

The actual construction of Phase I of the project began on January 3, 2003 with the hiring of both the Portal Project Coordinator (myself, Nadine Romero) and the Contractor, Windsor Solutions and was completed in 5 months. Currently, the portal is being populated with dataset entries and the official public release date is scheduled for June 25, 2003.

During Phase I we managed some 340 decisions on the design, construction, testing, esthetics and functionality of the portal. Such decisions were made largely through team consensus with the Salmon and Watershed Information Management Team (SWIM) and the Project Coordinator in a series of team meetings held throughout the 5 months (Appendix A). SWIM is an interagency team consisting of IT manager leads from the Washington Departments of: Information Services, Ecology, Transportation, the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation, Natural Resources, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, WA Fish and Wildlife, Conservation Commission and the Office of Financial Management.

In late January of 2003 SWIM delegated itself into component work teams which included a *Design Team, Date Catalog Team, Testing Team, Marketing Team* and the *IAC Technical Team*. Project Management Notes are filed in the attached Appendix for a review of who was on project team and meeting dates.

Policy and Reflective Analyses of Phase I of the Portal

The key reason for the development of Phase I of this portal is to provide the public and government users with a type of preliminary "environmental search engine" that can quickly locate datasets, maps, applications, reports and other types of environmental applications housed at many state agencies.

In essence, Phase I serves as a more coherent and organized substitute for a "favorite links" section on someone's browser or an "encyclopedic reference" with a focus on multi-media environment. While it does not bring datasets into the server space at the host agency (IAC) or allows users to work with multiple datasets at their desktop, it references the dataset with a textual description and

provides the URL address and hyperlink. Contingent on a Phase I budget of $96,000 for a contractor and a 5 month time frame, we built the best "environmental search engine" and data catalog possible. More importantly however, is that Phase I can be thought of as a preliminary exercise and learning tool for integrated environmental data management and as an experimental *policy exercise of sorts*. In constructing the Data Portal and the Data Catalog it forced individual agencies to tangibly assess the types and quantities of existing datasets on their websites or get a status of data currently in the 'pipeline' for public release. Finally, the current Natural Resources Portal serves to create and stimulate data *visibility*. Even within agency websites key environmental datasets are not cataloged in a systematic way and are largely overlooked and buried in vast agency web architecture.

Integrated Environmental Data Management in Washington State: A Balcony View

There are many Washington State institutions which track, record, prepare, store and analyze environmental data (I would estimate that some 80% of multi-media data on air, water, biota, soil are not yet published on the web[1]). Thus, this portal exercise begins the collective process of determining what needs to be accomplished in dataset publishing, integration and delivery. But, there are key factors which have inhibited the development of integrated environmental data management in Washington State. On this project I was able to observe several items:

- "Epistemic Communities' of scientists, planners, NGO's and the public have blossomed in Washington State. Some of these are spawned out of legislative initiatives and others are self-propelled 'communities of practice' which meet to discuss environmental issues and concerns. But, large-scale 'ecosystem scale' integration of these groups is still lacking. Each one of these groups are trying to tackle the issue of making their data *visible* and *accessible* 'within' and 'without' their community. Many are discussing Portal initiatives of their own. However, high-level policy coordination does not seem to be present. Even on this Portal Project high-level policy coordination was dropped some time ago. The bottom line is this: observing cumulative and large scale effects on a regional scale will require better policy integration mechanisms and initiatives. We won't accomplish ecosystem scale learning without better policy integration tools and the first exercise would be to define what those could be and how they traverse across agencies.

- Large-scale government learning needs to occur about data, including data as a 'durable public good' which never loses its value.

---

[1] Best guess based on this position.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The next portal coordinator should continue to work with the existing web application and 'sculpt' it so that it provides only the best and most meaningful information. This includes continued work on populating the portal with additional datasets. Of course, determining what is 'best and most meaningful' is a continued policy exercise by the SWIM group. At a minimum a harsh look at the quality of 'maps' for example available through the portal needs a closer examination. Some of map quality is not good. Many users want something visually telling for reference and orientation. Many of the available maps do not provide this. Additionally, better URL orientation on the agency websites is needed in the portal. A critical look at these needs to be *on- going*.

- Phase II should indeed begin the effort to expand and include more Federal datasets along with local jurisdictions and NGO's. This is exciting terrain. One problem encountered out there, however, is that many NGO's do not have data published on the web and only available on CD's. For example, the National Audubon has a Critical Ordinances CD prepared for the public but would like to have space in the Portal to publish.

- Phase II should continue to work with the 'epistemic communities' and other 'communities of practice' out there for continued shaping and sculpting of the Portal (including Nearshore, Biodiversity, OWEB and many others).

- SWIM needs more work on thinking through 'portal' design and goals. We made this portal expansive in delivery of types of information and I believe rightly so, as our primary goal was create an application that 'uncovers' datasets and creates *visibility*. Ecology, for example, with its huge website gets better use by the public with our little 'search engine'.

- Our Quick Search is one of the best parts of our application. If left up to me I would redesign the homepage so that it was just "Quick Search" with a green "GO" button. That's it! No other text. It's just simple and google-like. A Washington "enviro-google".

- Phase II should simply embellish the 'search engine concept'.

- Phase III needs a lot more thought. Complex environmental data integration needs to be very high-level policy driven. Be careful.

- SWIM is a great functional group. I was pleased with the team and the quality of expertise. Keep going.

FOREWORD

Welcome to the Natural Resources Information Portal. The purpose of this document is to provide a 'captains log' of Phase I of the Natural Resources Information Portal. Integrated in this document is some of the pre-portal history and the step-by-step progress of the Salmon and Watershed Information Team (SWIM) from 1998 to completion of Phase I of the Portal on May 30, 2003.

There are many observers of our Washington environmental landscape and hundreds of scientists within Washington agencies who monitor and collect information. Washington state government recognizes the importance of making this information accessible to the public for watershed planning and analysis, restoration work, sustainable development and technologic advancement. We hope that the Public will use this portal not only as a quick 'encyclopedic reference' to peruse and obtain environmental datasets, maps and applications, but as a learning tool and bridge to understanding Salmon Recovery and other ecosystem-land use decisions. From January through May 30th, 2003 we undertook a swift effort to construct and launch a centralized Access Washington website that would consolidate where environmental data in Washington State agencies can be found. We hope in future phases (II and III) to add federal and local government datasets and non-profit ones recognizing the vastness and richness of environmental information outside state government.

As a scientist myself, what I personally enjoy about the Portal is its quick reference capability to find information imbedded in agency websites with out the hassle of trying to go to individual websites and the time-consuming task of 'looking around'. When I needed to immediately obtain a latitude and longitude reference or a 'well log', for example, I was able to snap open the portal and query on "Quick Search". There was no need to dig around through books and texts on a shelf somewhere or go down to Ecology to retrieve info or search like a madwoman on my "favorite links". We hope our portal can provide the same ease and satisfaction for the public.

Sincerely,

Nadine L. Romero
Natural Resources Information Portal Coordinator

The Salmon and Watershed Information Team (SWIM) is an interagency body formed in 1998 by the Monitoring Oversight Committee and was charged to

I officially started on this temporary executive management project on January 3, 2003. We interviewed the top three contractors for this project on the same day and within the following week after choosing Windsor Solutions, Inc. the project was off to a race to complete the entire design, construction and implementation of the Portal by May 30, 2003.

During the 5-month period we had some 18 Salmon and Watershed Information Management Team (SWIM) meetings and made over 200 decisions with regard to the design and operation of the Natural Resources Web Portal. Tomorrow on May 28, 2003 we are scheduled to place the final application on the production servers here at the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC). I am completing a number of marketing activities and will complete some closure documentation on this project to orient any future person on how this project came about and its legacy in coordinators. At least it will help clarify and anchor for the new person a sense of more formal history.